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Cultural Politics
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Source: *The Linen Hall Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Spring, 1989), pp. 26-27
Published by: Linen Hall Library
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20534065
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Poet **Gerald Dawe** thinks aloud about some recent books on cultural politics published in England by Scottish writers and considers their implications in an Irish context.

> Literature is necessary to politics above all when it gives a voice to whatever is without a voice, when it gives a name to what as yet has no name, especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude. I mean aspects, situations, and languages both of the outer and of the inner world, the tendencies repressed in individuals and in society.
>
> **Italo Calvino, *The Literature Machine* (1987)**

Over recent years History has receded from Irish television and radio. The rooting around for causes of the present political conflict has abated certainly in the Republic. Indeed here, History itself has become something else: the business of an identity being shaped-up, now that 1992 and All That is nigh upon us. History has been turned into an academic preserve or a literary construction and people, though they may still recall historical facts and events associated with the name 'Ireland', have grown sceptical about the whole thing. As a result the northern conflict has itself become remote. Attention here is on the rising tide of emigration, economic matters, the yuppification of the Republic.

There is an almost unreal atmosphere at present, like the prolonged quiet before a storm. One cannot help feeling too that should the storm-clouds burst there will be many dancing in the streets because, by and large, life has become a little less meaningful anyway. The slow attrition rate of murder and violence in the north is echoed, streetwise in the Republic, by increasing urban resentments spilling into violence and indifference. The continuity of political power-structures (and the silent absorption of some others, like the Trade Union Movement) have withstood all kinds of assault with little real effect on the Republic's social institutions and Constitution. Containment, even accounting for the terror of an Enniskillen or the tit-for-tat killings, has achieved a gagged immunity in so many people that it is hard for them to *think* about what is happening to the country of which they are citizens.

And perhaps this is where some of the trouble starts from in the first place — in the Irish sense of being a citizen, or more directly, of our definition of *civic space* to which the individual is responsible, beyond the immediate demands of home, family and religion.

In his very fine novel, *The Death of Men* (1981) set in Italy during the abduction and assassination of Aldo Moro, the Scottish writer Allan Massie has his chief character, Raimundo, remark:

> Yet when I thought about it [a hanging] the rough Justice of the Partisans had done nothing to prepare Italians for civil life; if we contrived to tear ourselves apart, wasn't it to some extent at least because of the honour we accorded to that violence we had decided to commemorate.

Irish life is similarly afflicted — 'the honour we accorded to that violence we had decided to commemorate'. Behind the influential prim decorum of English law, the northern Unionists, for instance, were willing and able to maintain a little feudal state of their own, self-righteously convinced that their masters in London had been more than paid for, from the rows of ships that slid off the slipways to the dutiful generations that fought the wars and so forth. Now of course, all that is over, as indeed it had to be since the North was built as a state upon such precarious foundations. It has been grimly tragic though that it took so long to recognise this.

Yet there were voices, artistic voices quite some time back, but so pressingly real today, who warned and exposed the nature of *England* to itself, though none came from the North. One thinks of the following words of D H Lawrence — a writer whose background is publicly amenable to a majority of northerners, with its working-class and evangelical dimensions, not to mention the moral and sexual repression close to both communities — when in a letter from Italy he describes his feelings on reading there Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns:*

> I am used to the people going by outside, talking or singing some foreign language, always Italian now; but today, to be in Hanley, and to read almost my own dialect, makes me feel quite ill.

But why should Lawrence, with that remarkably attuned and rich feeling for dialect and the colloquial nuances of his Nottinghamshire home, feel ill?

> I hate England and its hopelessness. I hate Bennett's resignation. Tragedy ought really to be a great kick at misery... I hate it. I want to wash again quickly, wash off England, the oldness and grubbiness and despair.

What Lawrence is registering here (in 1912) is his sense of rejecting the failure of England to live up to some kind of civic eloquence and understanding:

> I don't believe England need be so grubby. What does it matter if one is poor, and risks one's livelihood, and reputation. One *can* have the necessary things, life, and love, and clean warmth. Why is England so shabby?

Lawrence's exasperation and exile were, of course, *total*. He was an inner emigré of a rare sort but it is instructive to consider why so few Irish writers, north or south, have opened out Lawrence's question into a wider context. What is the relation between these countries of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales?

Recent work published in England, however, suggests that various writers *are* now examining precisely this relationship. For example, John Osmond in *The Divided Kingdom*, the book accompanying Channel 4's television series (Channel 4/John Constable, 1988, £6.95), and Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy* (Radius, 1988, £8.95 pb).

Both books represent a crucial shift in viewing the current inter-dependencies of the countries, communities and/or states that make up the islands of Britain and Ireland. As John Osmond's conclusion to his chapter on the north makes clear: '... such fundamental changes to the framework of the British State (e.g. A Bill of Rights, Supreme Court; P.R.; written constitution provided for the North), embracing sovereignty of the people rather than the Crown in Parliament, would serve to push Ulster towards independence' (p.113). And of course alter fundamentally the 'British' state *and* the Republic.

Whatever one thinks about independence as a viable option in the north — or in Scotland or Wales — the fact remains that *change* is taking place in British politics. These changes, charted and called for in Neal Ascherson's excellent collection of articles, *Fighting with Shadows* (Radius, 1988, £7.85), concern the

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viability of the British state, and in a grouping like Charter 88 one sees another manifestation, at a cultural level, of how these things are developing outside Ireland.

Inside the country, predictably I suppose, few have taken account of the likely changes, or of the role of the monarchy which Tom Nairn's *The Enchanted Glass* so effectively deconstructs along with the fossilized constitution it heads and the outdated sense of national (i.e. British) identity which both Crown and Parliament oversee.

If A.T.Q. Stewart is correct when he says that 'Belfast is pro-British and anti-English, whereas Dublin is pro-English but anti-British' (*Divided Kingdom*, p.109) that leaves some common, albeit paper-thin, ground to negotiate upon. But as Tom Nairn's *The Enchanted Glass* illustrates (and his previous study, *The Break-Up of Britain* anticipated) if there is no *political* movement then the North's 'glamour of backwardness' will lead, literally-speaking, into 'a high cultural gloom'. The shabbiness of spirit which Lawrence identified with England will bloom again.

It is perhaps relevant to note here that with the exception of Lawrence, a midlander, the writers I have mentioned are Scottish — Massie, Ascherson and Nairn. Indeed, in their very different ways, all three have interpreted what Christopher Harvie has called, in *No Gods and Precious Few Heroes*, his history of modern Scotland

> the theme of Scotland's industrial stagnation and eventual decline: from being by any standards a substantial world industrial power in 1914 to its present insecurity and insignificance.

The political parallels with the North are obvious and while the Republic mesmerizes itself with an economic holding-operation, the currents of change will finally begin to surface and find their own level. As Raimundo remarks in Allan Massie's novel

> it is the State, not the family, which exists as the means of guarding civil life; and that is, after all, what we mean by civilisation. It is a product of the State. Without the sanction of the State, we are back in the days of the robber barons. Isn't this what Aquinas meant by his justification of the State, that, for fallen man, it is the *sine qua non* of civil life?

Good question.

Alan Gailey (Ed), **The Use of Tradition: Essays presented to G. B. Thompson.**

Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, 1988, pp. iv+138. £9.95

Arguably the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum has been the only solid cultural achievement to have emerged from fifty years of Unionist government. Goodness knows what moved Lord Brookeborough in 1958 to back the project — 'a Protestant Museum for a Protestant People'? — but if so he was to be grievously disappointed for the museum has resolutely interpreted its brief in the widest possible manner and has in the last thirty years justifiably gained a world-wide reputation in the retrieval, study and display of material and non-material culture. Much of the credit for this flourishing state of affairs belongs to George Thompson. He helped assemble the team of specialists whose publications appear regularly; his was the guiding hand behind the first thirty years of its existence and, appropriately enough he is the recipient of this wide-ranging collection of essays.

Someone once said (it may have been me) that *Festschrift* generally deserve shortshrift by the book-buying public, the spectacle of the unpublishable contributed by the unscrupulous to be foisted on the unsuspecting being neither edifying nor diverting. There are, however, exceptions and this is one of them.

In this slim volume we are presented with fourteen essays exploring first, the links between tradition and cultural identity, second, the purpose and function of a folk museum and finally, three separate aspects of 'tradition'. If there is a central conclusion to be drawn from the essays in the first section, particularly those by Bell, Gailey, Buckley and Robinson, it is that the much commented on but little studied 'two traditions' thesis in Ulster is a myth. Differences which are frequently viewed as sectarian in fact on examination turn out to be attributable to regional or social variations. There is no single Protestant or Catholic 'distinctive tradition', argues Buckley, and Robinson in an interesting local case study of the sectarian geography of the Ards peninsula argues strongly that if there are two traditions in this area, they do not correspond to those of the contemporary political debate. McCaughan in his study of boat-building techniques stresses the high degree of borrowing in boat styles between Ulster and Scandinavia, and for Gailey, linguistic borrowings from Irish to English are yet another example of the meaninglessness of a rigid 'two traditions' dichotomy.

The second group of essays sets the Ulster Folk Museum in a wider context with comparative articles from Owen and Jenkins, examining respectively the emergence of the idea of the 'folk' museum in the nineteenth century and the development of the Welsh Folk Museum, a useful counterpoint to Estyn Evans reworking of his earlier article on the origins of the Ulster Folk Museum. Crawford and Ballard address the work that is currently underway in the Folk Museum; the former in a particularly rousing, even evangelical, offering stressing the vital contribution that the study of material remains can make to 'traditional' history. Adams, Fenton and Moor can bring up the rear with specialist pieces on eighteenth century popular reading matter, farmers' diaries as historical sources and the curious case of the arrival and disappearance of the spoked wheel in Ireland.

All these essays are useful and interesting but it is a disappointment that nowhere in the collection is there any indication that Ulster has an urban sector that has folk traditions of its own — the chip shop, the ice-cream parlour, and the picture house, not to mention the pub — surely deserve some attention? After all the museum is not just for rural folk. It may also be suggested that in cities and towns of Ulster the two traditions with their vertically organised communities may in fact constitute a reality.

✍ **Thomas Bartlett**

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